Erdogan’s Troubled Path to Better Ties with the US

Ever since Joe Biden’s inauguration as the US president, US-Turkey ties seem to have undergone a shift from a thorny and crisis-ridden path that characterised the Trump era to a relatively period of calmness and cooperation. This calmness manifested itself in a relative absence of exchange of critical statements between both leaders. Erdogan’s most recent eagerness to help the US with its withdrawal from Afghanistan by sending additional Turkish troops to protect Kabul air-port is only one of the ways that the Turkish president tried to improve bilateral ties. As such, no sooner after Biden’s arrival in the White House in January 2021, the Turkish foreign minister ambitiously declared that Ankara was ready to launch a road map for reconciliation with France, hold an international conference on the eastern Mediterranean with the European Union, resume exploratory talks with Greece and “set up a joint committee” to solve the S-400 issue with Washington. To project Turkey in even more ‘progressive’ and pro-West terms, in late June Turkish officials confirmed that the exit of Netanyahu in Israel could herald a new era in Turkish-Israeli ties. This pattern of positive messages to US/West showcases Ankara’s serious attempts at recasting itself as a ‘responsible’ player in Europe and NATO.

What has been the consequence of Turkey’s subtle pursuit of smooth ties with the US? When Biden and Erdogan met in June 2021, they sounded upbeat about the future of their ties. While this was quite different from the tone that Trump and Erdogan both had adopted vis-à-vis each other, it has so far failed to produce substantial results that
Turkey hoped for.

So, for instance, despite the apparent optimism, the underlying issues – in particular, Turkey’s purchase of Russian S-400 and its growing military ties with Moscow – continue to lurk in the background, preventing a full normalisation with the US or even NATO. Despite Erdogan’s offer to set-up a joint committee, Ankara remains adamant about retaining the Russian system, with Washington preferring a complete roll-back. Therefore, despite the upbeat tone of Erdogan and Biden, there was no breakthrough on the issue of S-400, with both leaders committing to continuing the dialogue.

Similarly, while Erdogan was super enthusiastic about appeasing Washington by offering its troop to continue to fight in Afghanistan even after the Pentagon’s formal withdrawal from it, Ankara’s ambitions have been undone by the resounding military victories of the Taliban (terrorist organization, banned in Russia). Notwithstanding the Taliban’s opposition to the deployment of Turkish troops in Afghanistan, Ankara’s plans to play a pro-active role in Afghanistan as a US ally have also been undone by Washington’s demand for housing Afghan refugees. On August 3, Turkish officials, realising that their relentless pursuit of better ties with the US entails a price that their country may not be in a position to pay, chastised Washington for their plan to use third countries such as Turkey to resettle thousands of Afghans who risk being targeted by Taliban fighters over their Washington links.

In a recent statement issued by the foreign ministry, Ankara rejected the plan, saying,

“As Turkey, we do not accept the irresponsible decision taken by the United States without consulting our country. If the United States wants to take these people to its country, it is possible to transfer them directly to their country by planes.”

Therefore, if Ankara’s plan was to anchor its role in Afghanistan as a US ally to emphasise its continuing importance for Washington to end its isolation in the West, it seems to have come to a halt in view of the trajectory that the war in Afghanistan has taken, with the Taliban more and more clearly poised to capture Kabul and establish their old-school Islamic Emirates. It has left Washington to look even more even to settle its former Afghan employees. With Turkey unwilling to do the duty, it will only wean Biden further away from Ankara.

While Afghanistan looks increasingly like a diminishing opportunity, the Biden administration, even after all the positive messaging from Erdogan, did not stop short of restarting court proceedings against the Turkish state-controlled Halkbank on grounds of its past violations of Iran sanctions. As such, even though Erdogan has long been asking the US to dismiss the case and stop proceedings, Washington seems to be keen to use the case as a political nuisance to control Erdogan, for the case can have serious economic and political implications for Ankara. For instance, whereas the Turkish government has been telling its citizens that Turkey is not legally bound by US laws and American attempts to penalize Turkey are an illegal application of the principle of extraterritoriality, it remains that Washington’s decision, should a settlement does not take place between the Justice Department and Halkbank, to impose heavy fines will further deteriorate prospects of better ties between Ankara and the US. The US could most likely use this case to press Ankara into accepting at least some of the refugees, a step that will only create more underlying tensions and points of friction.

Even though, Turkey aims to maintain that its trade with Iran did not violate US sanctions, the US law empowers the Treasury department to demand up to twice the amount of the illegal financial activities. While the real scope of such activities will need to be determined by the relevant authorities, but the US$20 billion figure mentioned in the indictment represents a staggering amount of money.

What is most troubling for Ankara is the fact its relations with the US are no longer determined by the fact that Turkey is a NATO member. While Turkey remains a member of the military alliance, it remains that Washington does not take Turkey’s apparent identification with the West into account when it makes policies vis-à-vis Turkey, or weigh in Ankara’s position vis-à-vis different issues, including Washington’s recent recognition of Ottoman Empire’s genocide of the Armenians.

With more than six months into Biden’s presidency, there seems to be no visible change away from the instability and volatility that characterised Ankara-Washington ties during the Trump era. With Erdogan’s ‘charm offensive’ having failed to transpire a positive shift in ties, and with Ankara just beginning to launch verbal attacks on Washington for ignoring them on vital matters, it seems that the politics of positive signalling has already run out of steam.
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